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ABSTRACT

This paper provides information on the use of referential communication tasks (tasks that structure speaking and listening behaviors so that participants need to interact to achieve accurate comprehension) in evaluating students' comprehension and listening skills. An introduction discusses interactive listening and the referential communication task as listening assessment. The next two sections of the paper explain referential communication tasks and their use in the classroom. The final section of the paper describes listening checklists as they relate to referential communication tasks, the developmental stages of children's active listening strategies, classroom observation, and formal assessments of speaker-listener interactions. Sample checklists and a list of references are attached. (RL)

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ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:
CLASSROOM DIAGNOSIS AND FOLLOW-UP

Evaluating Listening Skills

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INTRODUCTION

Interactive Listening

The prevailing view of comprehension is that meaning is a joint production of factors in the sender and in the receiver. For competent listening, it is not enough for the listener to make passive cognitive contributions that allow for the creation of meaning. Listeners are constantly making inferences based on what they hear that may or may not match the meaning intended by the speaker. The listener must have strategies for using prior knowledge and thinking processes of-the-moment for letting the speaker know whether or not a message has been comprehended as intended. Interactive strategies, such as requests for clarification, additional information, rephrasing, reviewing and paraphrasing by the listener, are ubiquitous. They occur in everyday, informal conversations, in telephone talk, group discussions, and in school and job-related communication. Interactive listening strategies are a central feature of communicative competence.

If comprehension results from interactive processes between senders and receivers, then instruction should promote active, engaging listening behavior. Furthermore, if interactive listening strategies are critical aspects of daily communication effectiveness, then assessment should also account for this aspect of listening competence.

Listening Assessment and Referential Communication Tasks

One method of teaching and assessing interactive communication skills in the classroom is through referential communication tasks. These tasks structure speaking and listening behavior so that participants need to interact to achieve accurate comprehension.

Traditional listening assessment does not address this interactive process of comprehension. Typical listening assessment instruments focus on the product, not the process, of comprehension. First, standardized measures such as the listening subtests on the S.T.E.P. Test (1979), the Stanford Achievement Test (1973), the Metropolitan Achievement Test (1978), for example, assess the results of students' literal, inferential, and critical thinking, or their ability to follow directions, hear sounds, or understand words in context. Second, criterion-referenced listening tests such as those used in the Massachusetts (1979) and Michigan (1979) state basic skills programs also measure the results of passive listening as students indicate their answers on multiple-choice questions and answer sheets.

A third type of instrument, observation checklists, allows for notations of student performance on listening tasks. Referential communication tasks offer one means for observing processes of interaction, as well as the product of listening comprehension on descriptive tasks. However, they do not serve all the listening objectives and administrative

goals of large-scale testing possible with standardized or criterion-referenced tests. Referential communication tasks, unlike more formal testing procedures, do offer the classroom teacher an additional way to observe critical, interactive processes and listening outcomes. Thus they have value for instruction and for assessment within a comprehensive instructional and assessment program.

Recent Educational Interest in Referential Communication Tasks

Referential communication tasks have been employed for several years in psychological research studies investigating factors associated with developmental stages such as role-taking ability, linguistic responses to varieties of feedback, and speaker effectiveness (Piaget, 1926; Flavell, Botkin, Fay, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968; Krauss & Glucksberg, 1969; Peterson, Danner, & Flavell, 1972; Glucksberg, Krauss, & Higgins, 1975; Piché, Michlin, Rubin, & Johnson, 1975; Johnson, 1977; Asher, 1978, Johnson, 1980; Jackson, 1980). Until now, little research has been reported on the educational implications of referential communication tasks, listener performance, developmental guidelines for assessing speaker-listener interaction, or curriculum applications. Thus referential communication tasks are relatively new facets of the communication curriculum. They are currently the focus of much interest in communication education as potentially valuable tools for instruction (Dickson & Patterson, 1981). This

discussion attempts to synthesize and apply the available information on the promising educational uses of referential communication tasks and to explore their implications for instruction and assessment in the classroom.

WHAT IS A REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASK?

In a referential communication task, one person attempts to communicate by verbal means with another about an object such as a map, a set of instructions, a picture or graph, or directions for building or opening something. For the listener, the task involves goal-directed, applied comprehension based on descriptive language used clearly and sequentially. The message refers to something understood, known, or seen by the speaker but only partially understood, known, or seen by the listener. The unrehearsed, verbal description of the speaker, typical of much everyday speech, is often unclear or incomplete so that the listener must actively engage in communication and comprehension processes. The message may contain omissions, disfluencies, ambiguities, and other common features of spontaneous, interactive communication. Referential communication tasks involve students in practical, information-giving and -taking situations like those frequently encountered in the classroom, at work, and at home. Providing practice in basic communication competence such as using language clearly and sequentially to accomplish a task, referential communication tasks also offer

practice in interaction strategies fundamental to many practical, speaker-listener transactions.

The participants may not see each other. They may, for example, communicate across a table with a screen or sit back to back. This restriction is imposed to discount the effects of nonverbal exchanges and to reinforce skill in verbal communication. Since listeners must monitor their own comprehension of the speaker's information, they may engage in questioning, paraphrasing, and reinforcement of the speaker. Receivers must have strategies for gaining, refining, and clarifying the information they need. Comprehension is achieved as a consequence of active, shared production of meaning by both the speaker and the listener.

WHY USE REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASKS IN THE CLASSROOM?

There are many reasons for adopting referential communication tasks in a variety of formats for listening instruction and assessment in the classroom. Some of these reasons are outlined below.

1. In referential communication tasks students actively employ speaking, listening, and questioning skills. Listeners ask questions of various kinds, rephrase, and paraphrase. Typical responses might include these statements: "I don't understand." "Did you mean . . ." "O.K., that's good, now I

see." "Could you say that again?"

2. Referential communication tasks provide observable evidence of children's effectiveness in communication. For example, in a task requiring one child to give another directions for finding a location on a map, the accuracy with which the pair accomplishes the task is easily assessed by the teacher and by the children themselves. Teacher assessment is accompanied by student self-assessment.
3. Referential communication complexity can be varied to suit the ages of the participants. Tasks might include block building for young students or giving instructions or directions for older students.
4. Referential communication tasks are motivating. Students readily observe their progress in reaching a goal. Assessment is based on behavior needed to reach an end, not on passive listening exercises used to obtain a grade or merely to rank students on proficiency measures.
5. When referential communication situations are used in the classroom, assessment activities can also be learning activities. Referential communication activities used for assessment need not differ from instructional activities or from other typical information-giving and -taking behavior in the classroom. Thus results of assessment can lead to

instructional goals with immediate applicability.

6. Questioning, planning, rephrasing, and reinforcing responses can be carried over into group discussion or to question periods after talks, reports, or regular classroom instruction.
7. Referential communication tasks teach listeners that they can facilitate communication effectiveness; it is not solely the speaker's responsibility.
8. Referential communication tasks help listeners develop plans or strategies for listening. Students are cognitively active as they think about the information they are receiving as well as the process of receiving it. Typical monitoring questions might include the following examples: "Do I need more information?" "Do I need to retrace my steps?" "Should I have more precise information?"
9. Referential communication tasks minimize the effects of nonverbal or visual aspects of communication and focus on effective uses of language.
10. Referential communication task research indicates that, regardless of age, children produce clearer referential messages when the context is communicative than when it is only descriptive. In other words, awareness of a listener helps the speaker

to be more specific and comprehensive than he or she would be in a description not intended for a designated audience.

11. Referential communication tasks may influence the skills of speakers, assisting them to observe effective and ineffective strategies and familiarizing them with the importance of feedback and cooperation in creating meaning.

LISTENING CHECKLISTS FOR REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASKS

Purpose of the Checklist

These listening checklists are intended to specify those understandings, behaviors, and outcomes expected in referential communication tasks. They are designed to reflect basic listening functions stated behaviorally for assignments at three general developmental levels. Because they focus on what students do in referential communication tasks, they offer students and teachers specific direction for emphasis in follow-up instruction. Therefore, these observation forms are intended to be used for assessment as well as for instruction.

Checklist Items Related to the Task

The categories, Basic Comprehension and Listening Outcomes, change from task to task. The teacher states the appropriate objectives for the specific referential communi-

cation task employed.

The categories, Active Listening and Speaker Interaction, remain the same for most referential communication tasks at a given developmental level.

Checklist Items Related to Developmental Stages

Research tells us that children acquire active listening strategies gradually through development and instruction. Before the second or third grade, for example, students generally do not seem to understand that messages are ambiguous. Even when they do recognize ambiguity, they do not formulate appropriate interactive strategies without instruction. Since development and instruction are critical, late primary, intermediate, and secondary students cannot be expected to use the same strategies. For example, primary level youngsters often assert that they don't understand an ambiguous message, but they do not ask the speaker for information. Thus instruction and practice in direct questioning is an appropriate late primary interactive listening task.

Intermediate level youngsters can not only be taught to ask directly for additional information, but they can also learn to ask for specific types of information. They may also ask the speaker to say the message in a different way, seeking rephrasing when needed from either peer or adult speakers. They may also ask the speaker to modify delivery (pace, volume, articulation) to facilitate comprehension.

Secondary level students should be allowed to explore the whole range of interactive strategies, adding skills in paraphrasing the speaker's remarks, asking for review and revision, and determining the goal or outcome of the completed task in light of its various parts or subtasks.

Classroom Observation

Basic Comprehension

This category includes the basic information students need to understand as they listen. This category will vary from task to task.

Active Listening

This category includes commonly used strategies for clarifying information. They promote active listening and apply to most interactive communication situations. Referential communication represents only one type of interactive setting. These strategies may not be needed, however, if the speaker is especially clear or if the task is relatively easy for the listener. Interactive listening strategies are acquired gradually through development and instruction. Students at the late primary, intermediate, and secondary levels should not be expected to use the same strategies.

Listening Outcomes

This category includes the purpose of the referential communication task. It states what should happen as a result of good listening, and it will vary from task to task.

Speaker Interaction

Because the behavior of the listener in an interactive communication task depends in part on the effectiveness of the speaker, these checklists account for the speaker's role as well as that of the listener. If the speaker is not effective in presenting information, then the listener will have to be effective in clarifying it. On the other hand, if the speaker is effective or if the task is familiar, then many of the Active Listening strategies will be "not needed."

Formal Assessment

For classroom observation of instructional tasks, spontaneous speaker-listener interaction may be noted on the checklists. However, for formal assessments, the speaker should use a prepared script whose content, directions, language, pacing, etc. are carefully controlled to elicit the interactive strategies taught. The column labeled "not needed" would be eliminated from the checklist.

If the speaker's remarks are controlled, then listeners will be more likely to demonstrate the behaviors sought. The speaker will still diverge from the script to answer questions or to respond to requests, but the script manipulates the junctures at which listener intervention is expected. Listener responses can then be more clearly observed, identified, and recorded.

REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASK
INTERACTIVE LISTENING CHECKLIST

Late Primary Level

LISTENING BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT: ASSEMBLING TASKS (blocks, puzzles, figures, etc.)

BASIC COMPREHENSION

Did the listener respond accurately to instructions indicating:

color	yes	no
size	yes	no
shape	yes	no
directions for positioning objects	yes	no

ACTIVE LISTENING

Did the listener get clarification by:

indicating confusion or uncertainty about a specific subtask or part of the process (as opposed to general statements)?	yes	no	not needed
directly asking for additional information?	yes	no	not needed

LISTENING OUTCOMES

Did the listener assemble the pieces accurately?	yes	no
Did the listener assemble the pieces efficiently?	yes	no

SPEAKER INTERACTION

Was the speaker effective and clear?	yes	no
Was the speaker responsive to listener interaction?	yes	no

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Speaker	Listener	Speaker-Listener Interaction

REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASK
INTERACTIVE LISTENING CHECKLIST

Intermediate Level

LISTENING BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT: ASSEMBLING TASKS (blocks, puzzles, figures, etc.)

BASIC COMPREHENSION

Did the listener respond accurately to instructions indicating:

size	yes	no
shape	yes	no
directions for positioning objects	yes	no

ACTIVE LISTENING

Did the listener get clarification by:

seeking additional information?	yes	no	not needed
seeking more precise information:	yes	no	not needed
seeking rephrasing from the speaker?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to modify delivery (pace, volume, articulation)?	yes	no	not needed

LISTENING OUTCOMES

Did the listener assemble the pieces accurately?	yes	no
Did the listener assemble the pieces efficiently?	yes	no

SPEAKER INTERACTION

Was the speaker effective and clear?	yes	no
Was the speaker responsive to listener feedback?	yes	no

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Speaker Listener Speaker-Listener Interaction

REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASK
INTERACTIVE LISTENING CHECKLIST

Secondary Level

LISTENING BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT: ASSEMBLING TASKS (blocks, puzzles, figures, etc.)

BASIC COMPREHENSION

Did the listener respond accurately to instructions indicating:

size	yes	no	
shape	yes	no	
directions for positioning objects	yes	no	

ACTIVE LISTENING

Did the listener get clarification by:

seeking additional information?	yes	no	not needed
seeking more precise information?	yes	no	not needed
paraphrasing speaker's remarks?	yes	no	not needed
seeking rephrasing from speaker?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to modify delivery (pace, volume, articulation)?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to review steps?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to state goal of task?	yes	no	not needed

LISTENING OUTCOMES

Did the listener assemble the pieces accurately?	yes	no
Did the listener assemble the pieces efficiently?	yes	no

SPEAKER INTERACTION

Was the speaker effective and clear?	yes	no
Was the speaker responsive to listener interaction?	yes	no

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Speaker Listener Speaker-Listener Interaction

REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION TASK
INTERACTIVE LISTENING CHECKLIST

Secondary Level

LISTENING BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT: MAP DIRECTIONS

BASIC COMPREHENSION

Did the listener respond accurately to instructions:

indicating direction?	yes	no
identifying landmarks?	yes	no

ACTIVE LISTENING

Did the listener get clarification by:

seeking additional information?	yes	no	not needed
seeking more precise information?	yes	no	not needed
paraphrasing speaker's remarks?	yes	no	not needed
seeking rephrasing from speaker?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to modify delivery (pace, volume, articulation)?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to review steps?	yes	no	not needed
asking speaker to state goal or end?	yes	no	not needed

LISTENING OUTCOMES

Did the listener find the destination?	yes	no
Did the listener efficiently find the destination?	yes	no

SPEAKER INTERACTION

Was the speaker effective and clear?	yes	no
Was the speaker responsive to listener interaction?	yes	no

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Speaker	Listener	Speaker-Listener Interaction

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